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CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE QUESTIONS OF: FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Written statement* submitted by the Reporters sans frontières international, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[18 January 2002]

*This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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UZBEKISTAN: No free media allowed by this new ally of the Antiterrorist Coalition

No independent news sources are tolerated in Uzbekistan. State services constantly use tactics such as imprisonment, assault, and pressure on family members, against any journalists who violate this ban. President Islam Karimov is one of the thirty-nine predators threatening freedom of the press to have been denounced by Reporters Without Borders.

The fight against Islam and terrorism is systematically invoked by President Karimov's regime as justification for the brutal suppression of any independent news source. In a country where all information is issued and validated by the State, the press is prohibited from commenting about the existence of any opposition, criminality, corruption, or of any issues related to the respect of freedom, individual rights, and minorities (especially the Uigurs). One of the very few local television networks to have demonstrated a certain degree of editorial independence—the ALC-TV station in Urgench—periodically prohibited from broadcasting since 1995, was definitively shut down in July 2001.
Journalists who were in Uzbekistan in early October to cover the airstrikes against Afghanistan were systematically denied permission to access military sites or frontier posts, often after a waiting period of several days. Until November 25, the journalists were also refused the right to cross the border bridge that links the country with Afghanistan.

Two Incarcerated Journalists

Shadi Mardiev is still incarcerated in the region of Navoi (west of Samarkand), in the Kizil-tepa city prison where he has been held since 1998. The Tashkent Court of Appeal sentenced him to eleven years in prison on August 3, 1998, for "defamation" and "attempted extortion of funds." The journalist had been charged on November 1997, after a radio broadcast in which he exposed the embezzlements committed by Samarkand's Deputy Prosecutor. Shadi Mardiev directed the radio program "Man and Law," known for its criticism of public officials, on the regional public radio station of Samarkand (in the southern part of the country). His sentence was cut in half following the Presidential decrees of April 30, 1999 and August 28, 2000. The journalist, who has suffered two successive strokes, remains in a very critical condition.
Iusuf Ruzimuradov is still in prison, where he is serving an eight-year term. The journalist was sentenced on August 18, 1999 for seeking to "overturn the government by force," "participating in an illegal organization," and for committing "slander by the press" against the country's president—an offense punishable under Article 158.3 of the Penal Code. Iusuf Ruzimuradov was editor in chief of *Erk*, the last opposition newspaper to be published in the country until it was closed down by the authorities in 1993. Violent threats were made against members of his family, and torture and psychological incentives were used to obtain his confession.

Two Journalists Threatened

On June 16, 2001, **Asadulla Ortikov**, a former journalist with *Ozodlik* radio (Uzbek service of *Radio Liberty*), and frequent contributor to the *Harakat* journal, was interrogated by the Department of Internal Affairs (DDIA) of the district of Yakabadskiy (in the Kashkadar'ya region). During the interrogation, the head of the DDIA demanded that the journalist stop criticizing the government in his articles. Sometime later, the journalist was forced to leave the Kashkadar'ya region for Tashkent because of the multiple threats made against his family.

On July 12, 2001, **Ruslan Sharipov**, press correspondent for the Russian Prima press agency, President of the Union of Independent Journalists of Uzbekistan, and an Internet website host, was hunted down by employees of the National Security Service (NSS) while he was on his way to the Tashkent courthouse to cover a trial. His assailants were about to hit him when

some passers-by intervened. The journalist managed to take refuge in the local head office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). He had published, in late August, a series of articles denouncing the repression of the country's Muslims. Moreover, he was investigating the suspicious death of some political opponents. On August 31, Ruslan Sharipov was questioned by NSS agents on the grounds that he was involved in the activities of a terrorist group. Secret service agents pressured some of his relatives. His mother, brother, and one of his cousins were interrogated and threatened. In an open letter to the Uzbek President, Ruslan Sharipov demanded that the President order his Security Service to stop following him and menacing his family, and to allow him to carry on his work as an independent journalist.

Pressures and Constraints

In April 2001, the government took over the transmitter of the ALC-TV television station in Urgench (in the northern part of the country), which had been sanctioned by regional authorities four times since 1995. The station's director, **Shukhrat Babajanov,** resolved to end the station's broadcasting in July 2001.

In May, the authorities ordered the periodical *Oina*, a Tajik-language newspaper for young readers, to cease publication after its editorial staff criticized Samarkand municipal and regional authorities.

On May 17, fifteen militia officers visited the home of the sister of **Jahangir Mamatov**, a former *Erk* journalist who had taken up refuge in the United States, where he contributes to *Voice of America* Uzbek-language broadcasts. The police allegedly planted a packet of drugs in the apartment. Jahangir Mamatov's mother and sister were charged in an obvious attempt to exert pressure on him.

On July 6, **Alo Hodjaev**, *Tashkentskaya Pravda*'s editor in chief, in response to certain pressures, was forced to abandon his plan to introduce a free-speech column in the newspaper. In his opinion, "*Tashkentskaya Pravda* was the last fruit on a tree that can be cut down."

On July 9, the Tashkent Public Prosecutor instituted an action against **Shukhrat Babadjanov**, well-known journalist and ex-director of the independent television station, ALC-TV, shut down by the authorities. He was accused of having falsified a ten-year-old reference letter written when he joined the Uzbekistan Artists Union (UAU). On August 6, the journalist fled the country.

Until November 25, foreign journalists in Termez, on the Uzbek-Afghan frontier, were prevented from crossing the border near the bridge spanning the Amu-Daria River. Dozens of humanitarian organization members, as well as representatives of numerous international media, were denied permission to cross the border bridge into Afghanistan to reach the city of Mazar-i-Charif. On November 25, Uzbek authorities finally authorized the journalists to enter Afghanistan by crossing the Amu-Daria River on barges. The border bridge has been officially closed since 1997.